

Maritime Museum of San Diego

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\$5.00

Vol. 40, No. 1 Winter 2004

*A Journal of Pacific Maritime History*

*Islands on  
the Western  
Horizon*

A photograph of a lighthouse on a grassy hill. The lighthouse is white with a dark top section. It is situated on a hill with a dirt path leading up to it. The foreground is filled with yellow flowers and green shrubs. The sky is clear and blue.



# The Lost Voices of San Benitos Island

Fabio A. Martínez

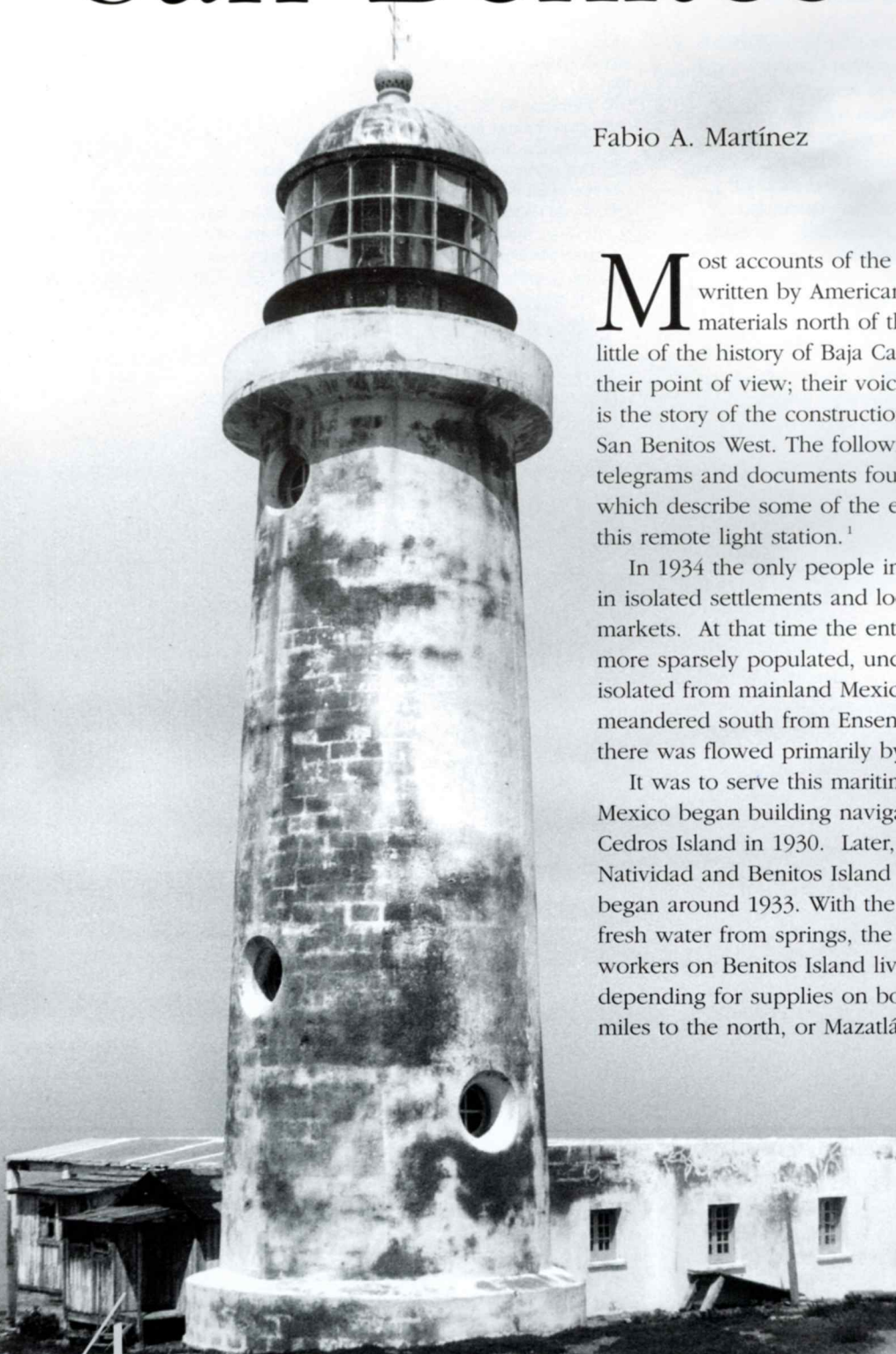
Most accounts of the history of Baja California have been written by American scholars working with archival materials north of the Mexican border. Unfortunately, little of the history of Baja California's people has been written from their point of view; their voices have been lost. A perfect example is the story of the construction of the lighthouse on the island of San Benitos West. The following narrative is based on copies of telegrams and documents found in the lighthouse by the author, which describe some of the events surrounding the construction of this remote light station.<sup>1</sup>

In 1934 the only people in this area were fishermen who lived in isolated settlements and looked north to San Diego for their markets. At that time the entire peninsula of Baja California was far more sparsely populated, underdeveloped and geographically isolated from mainland Mexico than it is today. A narrow dirt road meandered south from Ensenada to La Paz and what commerce there was flowed primarily by sea.

It was to serve this maritime commerce that the Republic of Mexico began building navigation signals at Punta Eugenia and Cedros Island in 1930. Later, manned lighthouses were built at Natividad and Benitos Island West, where construction of the latter began around 1933. With the exception of Cedros Island, which has fresh water from springs, the islands are rocky and arid. The workers on Benitos Island lived completely cut off from civilization, depending for supplies on boats from Ensenada, three hundred miles to the north, or Mazatlán, seven hundred miles south. Their

The construction of the concrete lighthouse on waterless Benitos Island was a significant achievement.

*Photo by the author, 1980*





food, supplies, mail, and even water had to come by boat, and in emergencies they had to cross over twenty miles of open water in whatever small craft was available to reach the cannery and small settlement at Cedros, where there was a telegraph.

Tiny Benitos Island West measures two by one-and-one-half miles, rising to a 660-foot hill in the center.<sup>2</sup> Supplies could be landed at a small sheltered cove on the east side, but the site chosen for the lighthouse was on the south end, which made it necessary to haul all the building supplies across the island. In early 1933, eleven donkeys were brought to the island for this task, but keeping them fed and watered proved a constant problem. Even more than their human counterparts, the donkeys suffered when supplies ran low.

On May 1, 1933 food and water for the donkeys was at a critical low due to delays in supplies from Ensenada. Telegrams between Cedros Island and Ensenada give a vivid picture of the situation. On May 5, 1933, the private shipping contractor Juan Hussong received a telegram from the *Capitán de Puerto* [Harbormaster] at Ensenada:

This department is aware that in the Island of Los Benitos W. there are a number of donkeys that are utilized by the workers for the construction of the new lighthouse being built on the island; the construction has been suspended because the workers on the island in charge of the construction of the building and equipment lack water and forage for the animals.

Captain Hussong was instructed to proceed to Benitos Island West and load the donkeys aboard, in order to ferry them to Cedros Island twenty miles away where they could find forage and water.<sup>3</sup>

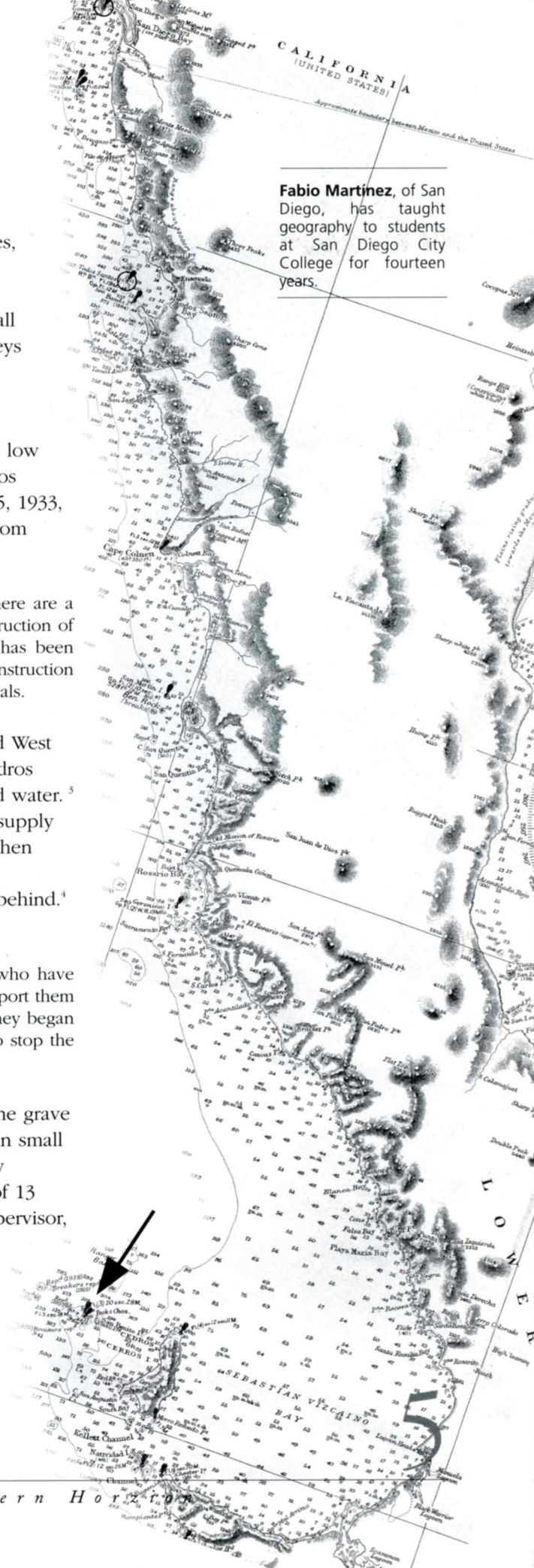
After unloading the animals at Cedros, Hussong's thirty-one ton supply ship *Freda* returned to San Benitos West with ten barrels of water, then left the island for Mazatlán carrying twenty-six restive workers who had finished their work on the island and were anxious to leave it behind.<sup>4</sup> According to a telegram from Senior Lighthouse Keeper Efrén Ruíz,

The workers who worked on the house and lighthouse tower, who have been waiting and hoping for the arrival of the ship that is to transport them to Mazatlán, after the date of the arrival of the ship has passed, they began to give signs of displeasure and indicated that they were ready to stop the first ship that came along to ask for help.<sup>5</sup>

Labor unrest could have deadly consequences, as the island's lone grave testifies. The inscription on a windswept concrete slab, picked out in small stones, may be translated "Major Enrique Dupre Rivas was cowardly assassinated by Claudio Ojeda and Eliberto Ramirez the afternoon of 13 April 1933." Nothing more is known of why these men killed a supervisor, nor is there any record of their fate.

Disgruntled workers were more common than homicidal ones. In 1934 *Ciudadano Guardafaro* (Citizen Lighthouse Keeper) David Long, a native of Baja California, arrived at Benitos West. Senior Lighthouse Keeper Efrén Ruíz soon found him to be a difficult companion. In April, Ruíz complained of the lighthouse's office that

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Only this grave remains to tell the story of a forgotten murder.

*Photos by the author, 1980*

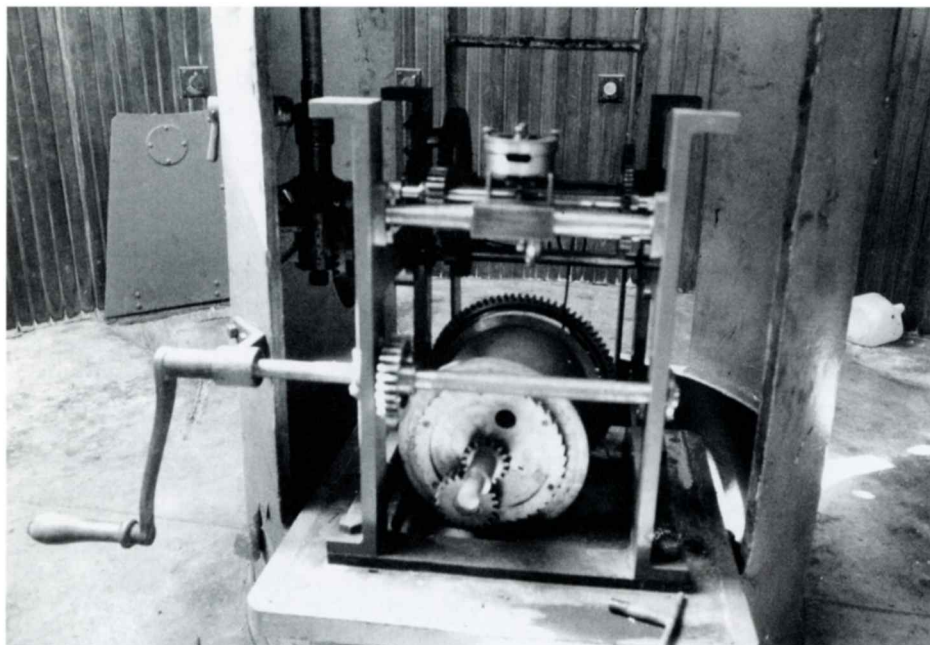
the place was a disaster of filth, paper everywhere, ashtrays full of cigarette butts, cigarette ashes all over the floor etc. etc. C. David Long had been reminded of his behavior several times and it needed to change or else.<sup>6</sup>

Long apparently did not improve his working habits, for on May 15, 1934 he was sent to Ensenada for further disciplinary action. According to Ruíz, he lacked respect for authority and was lazy, dirty, rude, insolent and constantly late for work. "Send me a Lighthouse Keeper who works," complained Ruíz, "because in this lighthouse people who work are needed."<sup>7</sup>

When finally completed, the lighthouse featured a lens and mechanism built by the Barbier, Benard & Turenne Company of Paris. The rotation of the light was made possible by the use of gears and weights, nineteenth-century technology made necessary because Benitos Island West was (and is) without any electricity. The distance from sources of







The French-manufactured lighthouse lens and machinery remained in place when the author visited in 1980.

*Photos by the author*

replacement parts was also a problem, for gears broke and the lens ceased to rotate smoothly. Over the course of time the lens has stopped turning altogether, and remains in a fixed position when lit.

In February, 1934, however, the lighthouse was not yet in operation and there were no alternate signaling devices on the island—no foghorns, sirens, or megaphones—when Benitos Island West suddenly came to the attention of the outside world.

On Thursday morning, February 23, 1934, the *San Diego Union* alerted its readers to a shipwreck:

## **S.D. SHIP SPEEDS TO AID OF TANKER FIFTY ABOARD STRANDED SWIFTEAGLE**

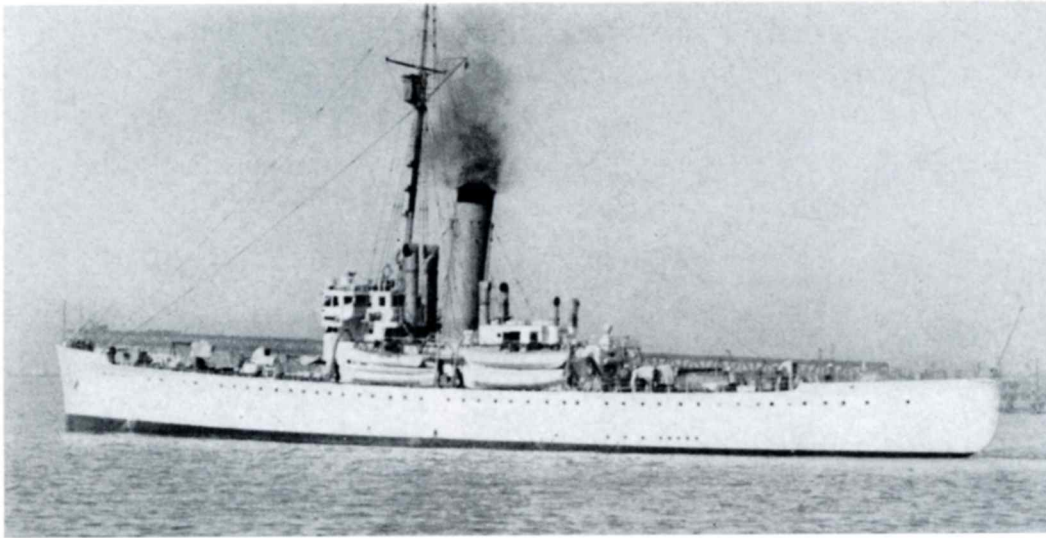
**Boilers Gone—Pounding Heavily,  
Says Flash to SS Catalina,  
Near Scene 290 Miles South of Here**

On Tuesday evening two days earlier, a heavy fog had descended on Benitos. Lighthouse Keeper Ruíz telegraphed Ensenada that,

At 1700 hours on February 21 we began to hear a foghorn, due to the thick fog that had been heavy all day; a signal at five minute intervals was heard. After fifteen minutes listening to the signals we proceeded to a steel rail to pound on it because the sound from it sounded like a bell; at 1930 hours the last signal was heard and we assumed that the ship had heard our signal and had veered away from the island and not run aground.

The next day when the workers began to work, the laborer whose duty was to gather sand gave notice that there was a ship aground on the island. I confirmed the fact that there was a ship aground on the north side of the [lighthouse] building in construction. Approximately thirty meters from the rocky shore there was a ship hard aground on the rocks; it was impossible to communicate with the ship because the noise from the heavy surf did not allow it . . . I returned to the lighthouse. On the 22nd at 1100 hours the American Coast Guard cutter *Chishone* [*Sboshone*] arrived; communicating by semaphore and signal lights with *Swift eagle* it dropped anchor a short distance





The four-year-old San Francisco based cutter *Shoshone* pulled *Swift Eagle's* crew off of Benitos, but could not free the tanker. In 1941, *Shoshone* would go to Britain as part of Roosevelt's "Lend Lease" program, surviving the war to be scrapped around 1950.

From Evor Kerr's 1935 book *The United States Coast Guard*, MMSD Coll.

away from the ship. On the 23rd another American armed forces ship arrived. The "*Pickard*" launched a boat and immediately began salvage attempts to free the ship from the rocks.

On 24, 25, 26 February efforts to free the ship from the rocks continued in spite of very heavy seas. On the 27th at 2400 hours the *Swift Eagle* sank stern first. The bow and the rest of the ship remained above water. At that moment crewmembers from the Coast Guard vessels *Pickard* and *Shoshone* went ashore to save the

crewmembers of the *Swift Eagle* who were still on board the stricken vessel.

At 0700 hours the *Swift Eagle's* crew was brought on shore using breeches buoys from the ship to shore. At 1600 hours the rescue was complete and all crews retired to their respective ships. A ship arrived to pick up the shipwrecked crew and left for San Pedro, California. The *Chishone* [sic] departed the next day in the direction of Cedros. Only the *Pickard* remained to pick up equipment left on shore and items from the *Swift Eagle*.

Because the ship was abandoned with valuables on board I ask for instructions to prevent ships from looting the vessel.<sup>8</sup>

On April 10, the Harbormaster of Ensenada reported to his superiors in Mexico City that,

Had there been signaling devices on the island besides a steel rail the incident might have been prevented. Foghorns [and] bells would have helped prevent the grounding of the ship. On the west coast of the peninsula thick fog with zero visibility is a constant factor, so thick that signal lights are of no use. There have been instances in Ensenada when ships have been unable to enter the harbor because of thick fog and lack of buoys with lights and fog horns.

He concluded by pleading, "I appeal to this department to take into

account that sirens or bells would give more importance to the lighthouses of this coast and would provide the ships better security."<sup>9</sup>

Two years later, the Benitos Island West lighthouse keeper reported to headquarters in Mexico City that the *Swift Eagle* was unsalvageable and that commercial fishing boats and ships had ransacked the ship for everything of value.<sup>10</sup>

**T**oday, Benitos Island West is inhabited for part of the year by the abalone divers and lobster fishermen of the Cooperativa Pescadores Nacionales de Abulon, headquartered on Cedros Island. A lighthouse keeper and donkeys still live there year-round. The lighthouse remains without audio signaling equipment.





## NOTES

- 1 The author discovered these telegrams and reports stored in the lighthouse in 1979 and 1980, and translated them. Copies of the documents have been donated to the MacMullen Library and Archives, Maritime Museum of San Diego.
- 2 The Islas San Benitos are located in the southern end of the California Bight, which extends from Point Conception south to Bahía Tortugas and Cedros Island. There are three islands in the San Benitos Group, only the westernmost of which is occupied. Charts and documents variously refer to it as Islas San Benitos W., or San Benito West.
- 3 Harbormaster Esteban Arjona, Ensenada, to Juan Hussong, "Asunto, Modificando instrucciones giradas para que el Freda zarpe a Mazatlán, Sin.," n.d. On 5 March 1934 a supply contract was signed between Arjona, representing the Secretary of Communications and Public Works, and Hussong, after which date supplies were delivered to the island on a regular schedule. Juan Hussong was a member of a prominent Ensenada family.
- 4 Senior Lighthouse Keeper Efren Ruíz to Harbormaster, Ensenada, 9 May 1933.
- 5 Ibid., 3 May 1933.
- 6 Ibid., 29 April 1934.
- 7 Ibid., 15 May 1934.
- 8 Ibid., 2 March 1934. See also Ibid., 23 February 1934.
- 9 *Capitan del Puerto*, Ensenada, to Mexico City, 10 April 1934.
- 10 *Guardafaro*, West Benitos Island, to Mexico City, 15 April 1936.

Mexican fishermen, part-time island residents, make their living from the surrounding sea.

*Photos by the author, 1980*

